Central American NEWSLETTER

Newsletter of the Central American Group of the Spanish Main Society.
Editor: Michael P. Birks, 36 Trevor Road, Flixton, Manchester M41 5QH. England. 0161 747 5924.

Vol.IV, No. 75 Sample copy $1 / 75p to non-members, see inside cover. April 1999

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The Central American Group is a part of the Spanish Main Philatelic Society, the leading Society in the world for collectors of Latin America. The journal of the SMPS is *The Mainsheet*, published quarterly, and is free with your subscription. The Secretary is Brian Moorhouse, PO Box 105, Peterborough PE3 8TQ, England. Phone 01733 2687078. The subscription is currently £8 in Europe or $20 elsewhere. Cheques in sterling or US$ should be made payable to "The Spanish Main". A three year subscription of £21/$54 and a five year subscription of £30/$80 are available and payment for these longer subscriptions may be made by Access, Mastercard or Visa. The minimum subscription is one year. If joining during the course of the year the appropriate part subscriptions should be added - Feb-Apr £6/$15; May-Aug £4/$10; Sep-Nov £2/$5 to pay through to the following January when the subscription paid will come into effect.

The Central American Group caters for the collectors of Mexico to Panama. Its journal, which you are now reading, is published quarterly, and is available by annual subscription. The subscription is currently £8/$15 resident in the UK or in Europe, or £11/$19 elsewhere. The minimum subscription is one year. If joining after June 1st, add 50% to pay through to the following January when the subscription paid will come into effect. Cheques in sterling payable to "The CA Group" should be sent to the treasurer, David Hankey, 2 Prince's Drive, Marple, Stockport SK6 6NJ, England. Phone 0161-449 0693. We shall be pleased to forward the relevant portions of multi-subscription cheques to the SMPS or the Chile Group for overseas members.

We regret we cannot accept dollar cheques for subscriptions because each cheque costs a minimum of £5/$8 to negotiate.

Back issues are available to members at 75p/$1.50 each, although Volumes 1 and 2 are sold out. Non-members may request a sample copy for 75p/$1.50 post paid. Requests for back issues should be sent the the Editor, to whom cheques should be made payable. Payments must be made in sterling or in dollar bills.

The group leader is Richard Saundry, Gwrych Cottage, Godstone Road, Bletchingley, Redhill, Surrey RH1 4PL, England. Phone 01883 742186.

The group does not run a packet. The SMPS Packet Secretary is Brian Sylvester, 3 Russell Court, St Lukes Road, Maidenhead, Berkshire SL6 7AP, England. Phone 01628 784555.

Although most packets are of a general nature, there are occasional specialised one country packets. Good and unusual material is always wanted.

Owing to insurance difficulties, the packet is not available to overseas members, although we shall be pleased to accept material for inclusion from them.

The auctioneer of the SMPS is Brian Moorhouse, to whom Auction and Private Treaty lots should be sent. Brian is a dealer, and will include your name on his mailing list if requested to do so.

THE NICARAGUA STUDY CIRCLE

Collectors of Nicaragua may wish to know that a study circle, devoted entirely to Nicaragua, exists and publishes a quarterly journal called **NICARAO.**
Details from the Secretary/Treasurer Erick J Rodriguez
11817 SW 11th Street, Miami FL 33184-2501, USA

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Vol.IV, No. 75 **April 1999**

From HAMISH REID

"Once again the York event more than lived up to its expectations. The sertting was great as we had clear blue skies with sunlight flooding into the stand. The colours of the exhibits were greatly enhanced. The disappointment was the body count - ten, including two guests. All who attended enjoyed a great philatelic afternoon, coupled with the opportunity of obtaining at incredibly cheap prices, material to add to their collections. The dealer variety and stock depth is much greater than any London show. "Stamp 2000" will have a hard job to live up to York standards for dealer participation and pricing.

Our membership in general, does not seem to realise the self-inflicted wounds they impose on themselves by not attending our meetings, in particular York. The hard core of exhibitors who create the variety of material shown and add in many ways to the bonding and good humoured atmosphere of these events are not an exclusive bunch of experts basking in a self-imposed glory of their own material and knowledge.

A good example was Mike Priddle, a comparative "new boy" to *Spanish Main* and his subject *Bolivia.* His "maiden" exhibit was listened to with great interest and respect and during the viewing period he received a great deal of encouragement and tips on layout and emphasis on certain areas from the experienced National and International award winning friends present. This is something that money cannot buy and is the whole concept for the continuance of *Spanish Main.*

Our next meeting will be March 6th at the Horticultural Halls, London, now re-named Philatex. Timed for 10.15 a.m. to 12.15 p.m. it means an early start which could not be avoided. Future events there will be 12.30 p.m. to 2.30 p.m.. This show clashes with Stampex, so hopefully our members will spend the early part of the day at Philatex followed by Stampex. The programme will lead with Denis Lavery's *Cuba* . This will be an expanded version of the 16 page exhibit which as the then Cup Holder. Denis should have shown at the Cup meeting in December, however as we ran on to 4.45 p.m. he could not show it then. This will be followed with Basil Lewis' *Argentina Centenary and Revolution Issues.* A favourite subject with me, it promises to create a great deal of discussion. Finally, having lugged round my *Provisional Air Mail Stamps of Chile, 1928/36,* as a reserve display, to every meeting last year, I have yielded to temptation and placed myself on the programme. This study was awarded a Vermeil at six Internationals."

PLEASE SUPPORT OUR EFFORTS - WE DO IT FOR YOU.

mpb

For the diary:-

Saturday 6 March 1999 10.15 a.m. to 12.15 p.m...
Spanish Main Meeting at the Horticultural Halls, London,
during the London International Stamp and Cover Show (*Philatex).*

Thursday 15 April 1999 1.00 p.m. - 3.00 p.m.
Stamp '99, Wembley. The show these is railways.

Saturday 15 May 1999 1.00 p.m. - 4.30 p.m. (with prior viewing)
Brian Moorhouse Auction at the Station Hotel, Peterborough

Saturday 12 June 1999. All day.
Spanish Main Meeting at the Victory Services Club, London.

Saturday 3rd July 1999. All day. *Midpex, Coventry.*

THE AIR MAIL TEST LETTERS OF 1946

by Dr R H SAUNDRY

Reprinted from *The Oxcart,* December 1998, with the permission of the author.

On 1 November 1946 the U.S. Post Office introduced a reduced uniform air mail tariff of 10 cents per half ounce to all countries of Central and South America, and to the Caribbean (with the exception of mails sent to Canada, Cuba and to Mexico). This reduced "US Composite International Airmail, Letter, Letter Package Rate" remained in force until 1 July 1961, after which rates were hiked to 13 cents for letters sent to addresses in North and Central America, or to the Caribbean, and to 15 cents for letters to South America. The 10 cent uniform rate of 1946 is often referred to by collectors as the "Hemispheric Rate".

Background

The USPO Department Information Service on Wednesday 23 October 1946 released two bulletins for use by the morning newspapers. The first of these two bulletins referred to the increase in the use of the US domestic airmail services following a recent introduction of a reduced uniform 5 cent airmail rate: figures for mails carried for the first fifteen days of October (after the introduction of the reduced uniform airmail rate) compared with the first half of September (before the introduction of the reduced uniform airmail rate) showed a favourable increase of 26.5%.

As Postmaster General Robert E Hannigan so aptly put it:

> *"Experience has proven that by offering a good service at reasonable cost, the public will utilise that service in ever-increasing volume. We are confident this will be true of nickel air mail ...* ***From October 27 to November 2 we are celebrating Air Mail Week*** *to bring to the attention of the American people the advantages of air transport. The President of the United States has added to the significance of this event by proclaiming this period as National Air Mail Week".*

But it is the second of these two bulletins that is of greater interest to us. To encourage the use of the impending 10 cent air mail rate to the West Indies, and to Central and South America on 1 November it was announced that the:

> *".... public test of the speed of air mail facilities between these countries has been arranged. For one day only, November 1, persons desiring to participate in this test may do so by addressing an envelope, pre-paid with a 10 cent stamp, to 'Pan-American World Airways System, Air Mail Test' at any of the capital cities in the countries listed here* [at the end were listed twenty-eight capital cities, including San José, Cost Rica]. *The sender's complete return address must be placed in the upper left-hand corner of the envelope. The envelope can be mailed in the regular way on November 1. Upon arrival in the country of destination, the date of receipt will be stamped upon it. Return postage will be applied by Pan American World Airways and the envelope mailed to the sender through regular air mail channels. The return address must be within the continental United States and only one letter should be sent to each country.*

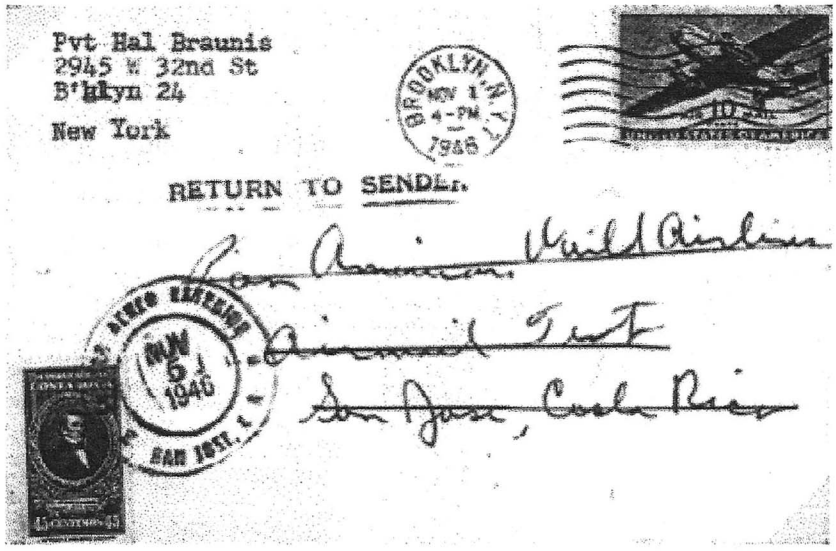


Figure 1: Postmark on back: Circular "Correos Aereos Exterior/ Nov 4 1946/San Jose, C.R." and privately applied "Received/PAA NOV 4 1946".
These postal markings indicate arrival in Costa Rica 4th November.
Cover correctly handled and sent back to the United States the following day.

The envelope can be mailed in the regular way on November 1. Upon arrival in the country of destination, the date of receipt will be stamped upon it. Return postage will be applied by Pam-American World Airways and the envelope mailed to the sender through regular air mail channels. The return address must be within the continental United States and only one letter should be sent to each country."

Thus the rules set out in this press release seem very clear and precise and there was little scope, you would think, that things could go wrong. In fact the system seems to have worked excellently and covers seem almost without exception to have been handled without any kind of problem, and the senders seems to have abided by these very simple mailing instructions. I illustrate here (Figs. 1 & 2) two such covers. Both were sent from the continental United States 1st November 1946 and were back-stamped on receipt by Pan-American Airways in San Jose, Costa Rica and in Tegucigalpa, Honduras on the 4th and 5th November respectively. The addresses were struck out, the relevant stamps for return airmail service to the United States were affixed at the bottom LH corners (sent back to the United States the day after arriving) and returned to the respective senders in Brooklyn and Medford, Oregon. All very correct, thus acceptable collectable airmail covers.

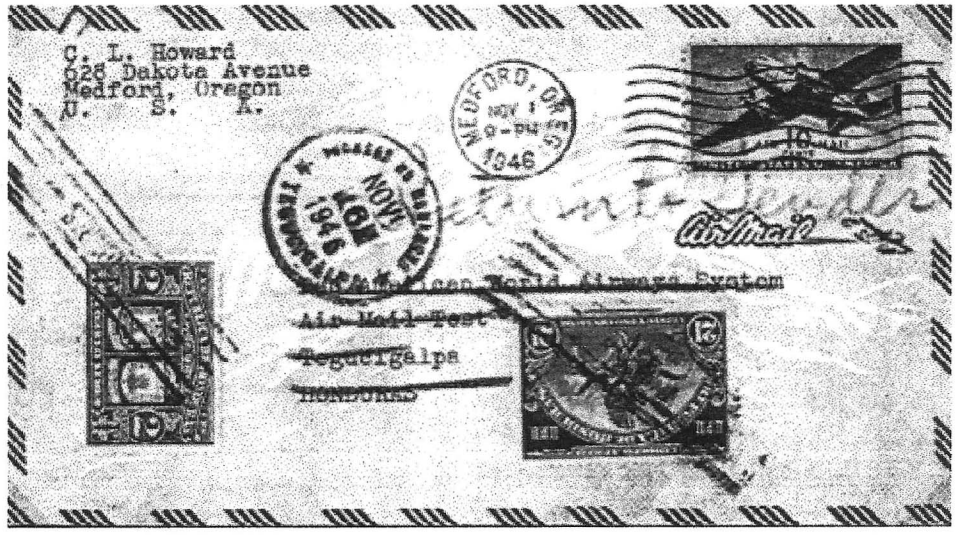


Figure 2. Postmarks on back: Circular "Administracion de Correos/Nov 5 1946/Tegucigalpa, Honduras" and "Medford/Nov 8/11 PM/1946/OREG./1".

Two other covers to Nicaragua, showing different backstamps, are shown as figures 3 and 4 on the next page.

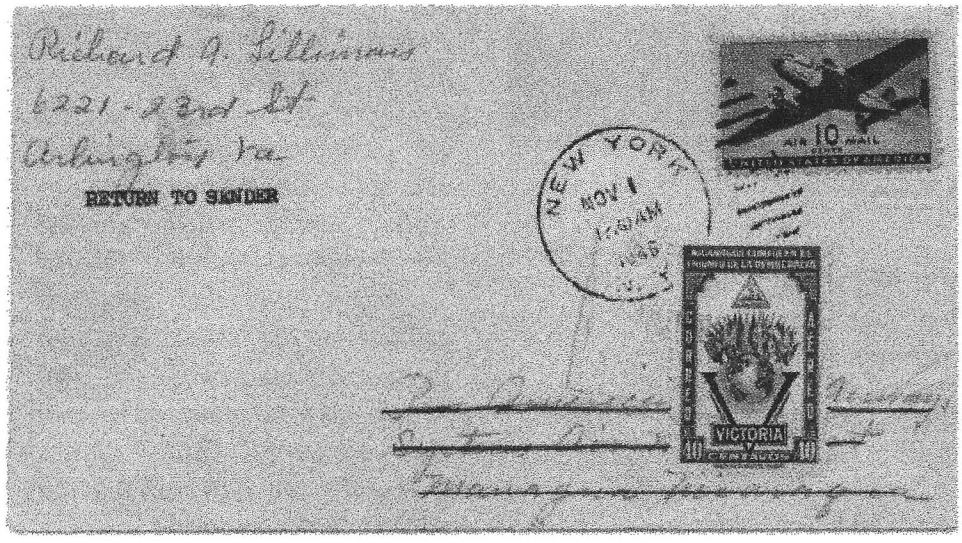


Figure 3.

Scarcity

There was, however, apparently one little "fly in the ointment". You will no doubt have already spotted that the intervening period between sending out the press release on 23rd October and the date for sending the test letters, 1st November, was exceedingly short.

No doubt this short period of notice precluded many interested collectors sending their covers. In the 2nd November 1946 issue of ***Stamps*** (Vol.57, No.5, page 240) we read a repeat of the notice exactly as given by the USPO in their press release, but followed by the Editor of *Stamps* note:

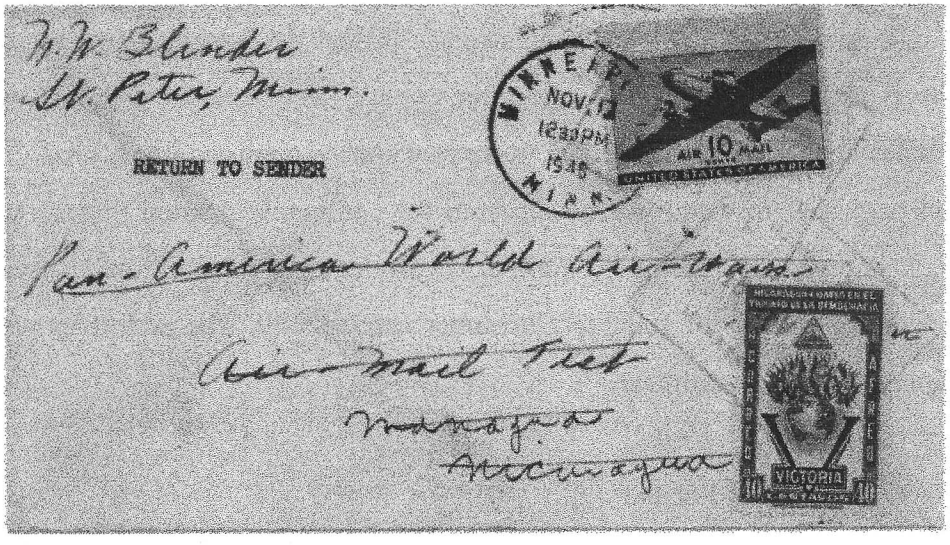
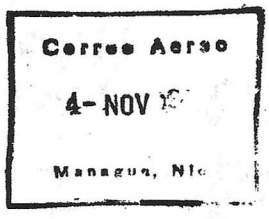
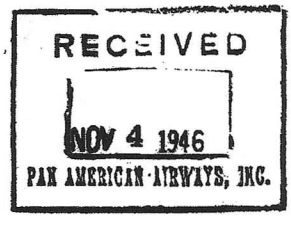


Figure 4.





"We publish the above just as it was received from the Post Office, for the record, although once again the notice arrived too late for collectors to get covers. It is unfortunate that collectors are being deprived of the opportunity to get covers aboard the many first-flights that are taking place today ..... If you have a complaint, please send it to the Post Office Department, for they only can remedy the situation, if in fact it can be remedied. There may of course be some legitimate reason why more advanced notice cannot be given, but only the Post Office Department can answer that question."

From the above there arises the question of the scarcity of such Test Letters. In fact this scarcity factor has again recently been voiced in the March 1996 issue of the ***American Philatelist*** (pp. 209-210), part of an intriguing article devoted primarily to discussion of the Transport Air Mail Series of United States postage stamps of 1941. In this latter article a further Air Mail Test Letter of 1946 (sent to Lima, Peru) was illustrated, and which was stated to bear the receiving mark on the back in Peru for 3rd November. The writer of the article in the American Philatelist added;

> *"Although this is plainly a souvenir cover* (referring to the cover sent to Peru) *of a special event that documented an important new rate, it is not listed in the American Air Mail Catalogue. With APRL librarian Gini Horn's assistance I learned why it is not ..... (then followed the same USPO notice of 1946) ..... That should have provided a fine opportunity to participate in National Air Mail Week, but it turned into a disappointment. So the illustrated cover* (the one sent to Lima) *is a lucky survivor and an exzceptionally nice Transport Series usage."*

The implication here is that any such Air Mail Test Letter of 1946 is a relatively scarce and desirable item. I am bound to say, however, that as an interested UK collector my general impression is that such covers are relatively common. I have never made a specific effort to collect these covers as items in their own right, but as a veritable one-country collector I generally recollect seeing several such covers over the years, some sent to Costa Rica. In fact, at a recent stamp fair in Kent (US collectors would probably call these events "Stamp Shows") a small-time dealer had a general stock of foreign air mail covers and taking the time to go through this small selection I noted that he had several Air Mail Test Covers from 1946 to various ddestinations all over South America (unfortunately none to Costa Rica), priced at c£10 each (US$16). So, if price is any kind of reflection of scarcity, this suggests to me these covers are not really scarce at all.

But, of course, prices offered ultimately must reflect supply and demand, and if most collectors are like me they will not generally have been well informed what these covers are about, that these covers are really very desirable, so possibly few people bother to collect them. So if you want a tip, next time you see one of the Test Covers, in good condition of course, in the sort of price range I have jujst quoted, then buy, buy, buy. Their scarcity value will be recogniserd one day soon and they must surely represent some kind of small worthwhile investment.

The Practice Air Mail Test Letter

Now, if you are wondering why I have chosen to launch forth in such detail describing these Air Mail Test Letters, this is because I have recently had my interest in such c overs aroused by our member, Neal West, who also kindly sent me the Air Mail Tester sent to Costa Rica (Figure 1). I had a further look at the one and only Air Mail Tester I had in my collection. And joy, oh joy! I found I was sitting on what I am inclined to believe is a little aerophilatelic gem that I had hitherto not recognised for what it was (Figure 5).

That which I had always thught to be just another Test Cover turned out actually to be a pre-Test Cover. This was sent from Head Office, Pan American Airways, New York to their office in San Jose, Costa Rica. but sent 28th October. and returned 31st October.

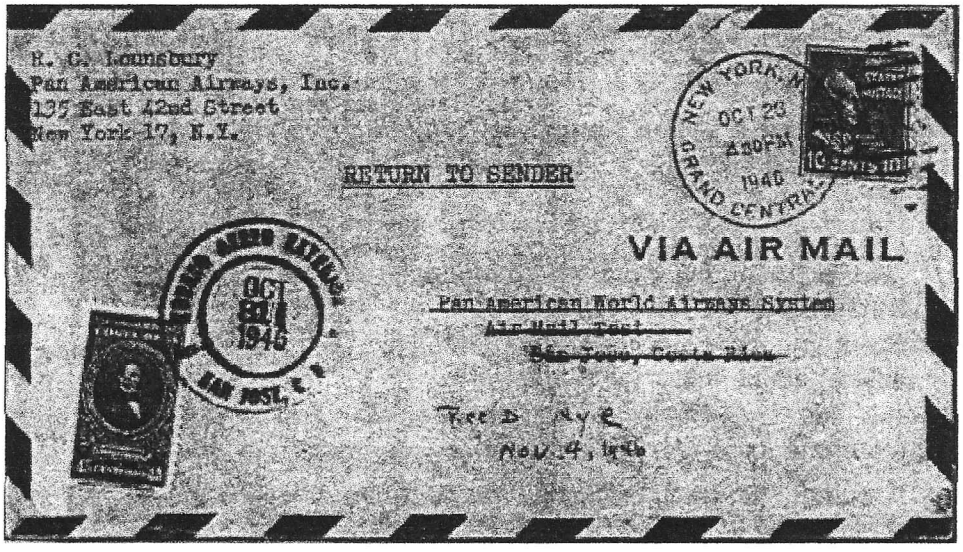


Figure 5. Receiving office mark on back: Correo Aereo Exterior Oct 30 1946, San Jose, C.R..

I found the original instructions were inside this cover (Figure 6, below), which was not as I first thought the standard instructions to the US public at large, and which a putative helpful collector had left inside.

PRACTICE AIR MAIL TEST LETTER

The air mail test letters to be mailed by the public in the United States on November 1, 1946, should reach your office in a few days. This practice air mail test letter should have been handled the same as you will handle the air mail test letters mailed on November 1, 1946. The steps in handling an air mail test letter are:

(1) Don't open, but deliver encelope to designated person in your office, who will
(2) Stamp back of envelope with the date it was received in your office.
(3) Make notation "Return to Sender" on front of envelope.
(4) Draw line through address "Pan American World Airways System, Air Mail 'Test".
(5) Place proper amount of air mail postage in lower left hand corner of envelope and return to local post office for dispatch back to the United States by airmail.

Figure 6. Instructional leaflet found inside the above letter.

It turned out to be the actual instructions to the Pan-American Airways Agent in Costa Rica how to deal with the expected flood of letters a few days later. This cover was in fact exactly what it said it was, a **Practice Letter for the forthcoming Test Letters of 1st November,** and not just another run-of-the-mill collector's item. I had shown this cover countless times as part of my display to local philatelic societies and nobody had ever recognised it for what it was.

I guesse there would have been at least one such letter sent to each of the 27 capital cities (my guess is that there would in all likelihood have been only one such letter sent to each country). I recently saw a pre-test cover sent to the Pan American office in Kingston, Jamaica on 28th October. Most such covers, if they have survived, are as likely as not to have remained unrecognised for what they truly are. Examine the dates carefully - dates earlier than 1st November are likely to be the more elusive Practice Air Mail Test Letters. Good Hunting. [If you find the Nicaraguan one let me know - Ed.]

HONDURAS: THE MORAZAN ISSUE

(Part 3 - The Reprints)

Edited and Illustrated by MICHAEL P BIRKS FRPSL

The postmarks used for this issue were usually the obliteration of seven bars, mentioned under the first issue, struck in black or blue, and various round cancellations of nondescript designs and three concentric circles, struck in violet ink. The obliteration, consisting of a white five-pointed star in a solid circle surrounded by an outer line, is also found in blue or violet. Postmarked copies are not uncommon, but less so than formally, no doubt because all the post offices were now provided with proper cancelling stamps. The circular town date-marks are also sometimes met with on these stamps.

Proofs are known of all values very carefully printed on a thin white paper:-

1 centavo, violet.
2 centavos, red-brown.
½ real, black.
1 real, deep green.
2 reales, deep blue.
4 reales, vermilion.
1 peso, deep orange.

From their appearance and colours, they were obviously struck at the time of the original issue, and not with the later special printing.

It was during the period of currency of this issue, namely, on 1st April, 1879, that the Republic of Honduras joined the Universal Postal Union.

Reference List

April 1878. Thin hard white wove paper. Perforated 12.

1 centavo, violet.
2 centavos, red-brown
½ real, black
1 real, deep dull green.
2 reales, blue.
Half used as 1 real
4 reales, vermilion
1 peso, deep orange.

Special Printing (1889)

The National Bank Note Company was amalgamated with the American Bank Note Company sometime in the 'eighties. Further printings of the Morazan series were made in the latter firm in 1889. The *American Journal of Philately* (Vol. III., p. 216) informs us with regard to these stamps:-

> "Towards the end of 1889 the Government of Honduras began to run short of certain values of these stamps, and as they had to supply a certain quantity of each value in order to obtain the new issue from the Hamilton Bank Note Company, the American Bank Note Company were ordered to print a new lot. However, some of these new stamps differ considerably from the old in regard to colour, but they cannot be considered as reprints, as they were in use for a short time in the country, and were accepted in payment of postage."

This special printing consisted of all values, and not of the 1 centavo, 2 reales, 4 reales and 1 peso only, as one might be led to believe by the [old] catalogues. Their character and the manner of their appearance are very unsatisfactory, and I consider their status as being very little, if at all, above that of reprints.

In spite of the statement that they were accepted for postage, I have never yet seen a satisfactory *used* copy of any value of this special printing, though there are shoals of the post-marked-to-order stamps on the market, some with full gum (which sufficiently betrays their character), others with the gum carefully removed! I have been shown covers used as late as November and December, 1889, but in every case they were franked with originals and not with stamps of the 1889 printing. [It is interesting to note that Gibbons add a footnote to this issue, saying "(They) are rare in genuinely used condition" and do not price them.]

These stamps may be found obliterated with a double lined circle containing a cross-shaped device, very similar to that noted under the 1866 issue, but struck in violet. Cancellations consisting of three concentric circles, or large double-lined five-pointed star, or a small double-lined five-pointed star in the centre, are also to be met with struck in violet ink, the last sometimes in black. As all these cancellations are abundantly found on the Seebeck issues I have my doubts as to their bona-fides, and would counsel collectors not to put too much faith in them.

A little practice and experience is required in order to separate the sheep from the goats, for in the case of the 2 centavos and ½ real the colour is of but little assistance. The most prominent characteristic of this special printing is the thick soft and rather highly surfaced paper, which may be recognised at a glance from the thin hard and semi-transparent paper of 1878: the gum of the 1889 prints is yellowish and thick instead of quite colourless. Apart from the colours they may be easily be picked out by their fresh and carefully printed appearance.

The 1 centavo was printed in a very deep violet. The 2 centavos does not appear to be in such a rich red-brown colour as the original, but is more easily recognised by the paper and gum. The colour of the ½ real is to all intents and purposes identical with that of the original, but the impression is clearer and gives evidence of greater care. The 1 real special printing is easily distinguishable by means of its black-green colour, totally different from the deep dull green of the originals.

The colours of the 2 reales and 1 peso are not at all like those of the originals of the same denominations, being a deep bright ultramarine, and deep orange-yellow respectively, instead of dull blue and deep orange.

The colours of the two printings of the 4 reales are very closely matched, though described in the catalogues as "vermilion" (1878) and "scarlet" (1889) respectively: the 1878 printing seems to contain perhaps a little more *red*, while the 1889 special printing appears to disclose a carmine tint, but the paper and gum are the best guide, as indeed they are for all values. In reality, the distinction between the two printings of the 1 real is the most distinct.

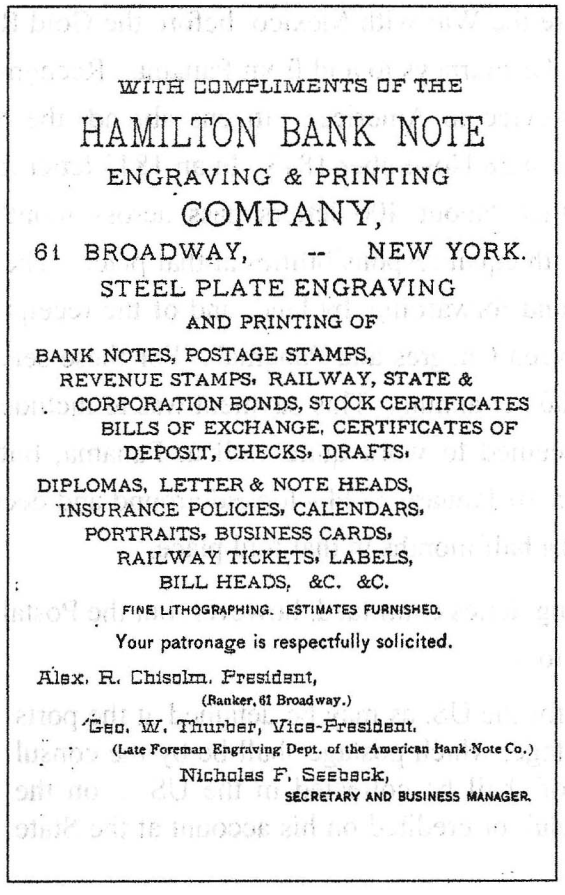
As I have said several times before, paper and gum are the best guides, but after a little experience one can pick out an original at a glance; there is an intangible, indescribable "something" about their appearance, which only practice can teach the collector.

Reference List

Late 1889. Thin soft white wove paper. Perforated 12.

1 centavo, deep violet.
2 centavos, red-brown
½ real, black
1 real, black-green.
2 reales, bright ultramarine.
4 reales, scarlet.
1 peso, deep orange-yellow.

The stamps were produced before the Seebeck contract came into operation and despite this Seebeck used them as part of his advertising campaign in the form of complimentary cards. As with Nicaragua the issue prior to the Seebecks came in for reprinting in 1889 as part of his contract. This meant that he had some income in the first year of operations rather than having to wait until at least May of the second year, the deadline for the return of unsold remainders.


WITH COMPLIMENTS OF THE
HAMILTON BANK NOTE
ENGRAVING & PRINTING
COMPANY,
61 BROADWAY, -- NEW YORK.
STEEL PLATE ENGRAVING
AND PRINTING OF
BANK NOTES, POSTAGE STAMPS,
REVENUE STAMPS, RAILWAY, STATE &
CORPORATION BONDS, STOCK CERTIFICATES
BILLS OF EXCHANGE, CERTIFICATES OF
DEPOSIT, CHECKS, DRAFTS,
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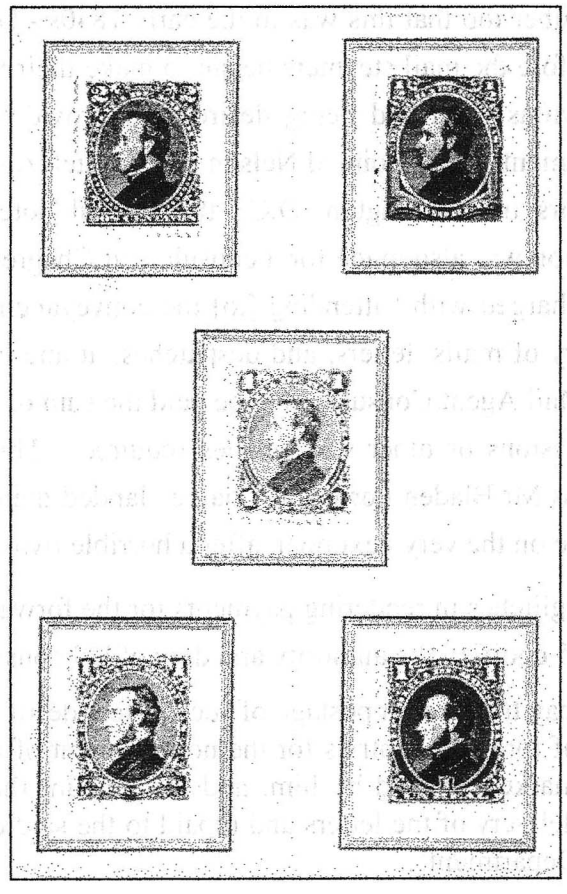
Geo. W. Thurber, Vice-President.
(Late Foreman Engraving Dept. of the American Bank Note Co.)
Nicholas F. Seebeck,
SECRETARY AND BUSINESS MANAGER.



MAILS ACROSS THE ISTHMUS 1840-1955 - Part 2

from an unknown source

Without some kind of arrangements for looking after the US mails, for example, there was no way a letter could have left Panama for the US on a government to government basis since there was no postal agreement between the two nations. In 1842, US Consul William Nelson wrote to his superiors that: -

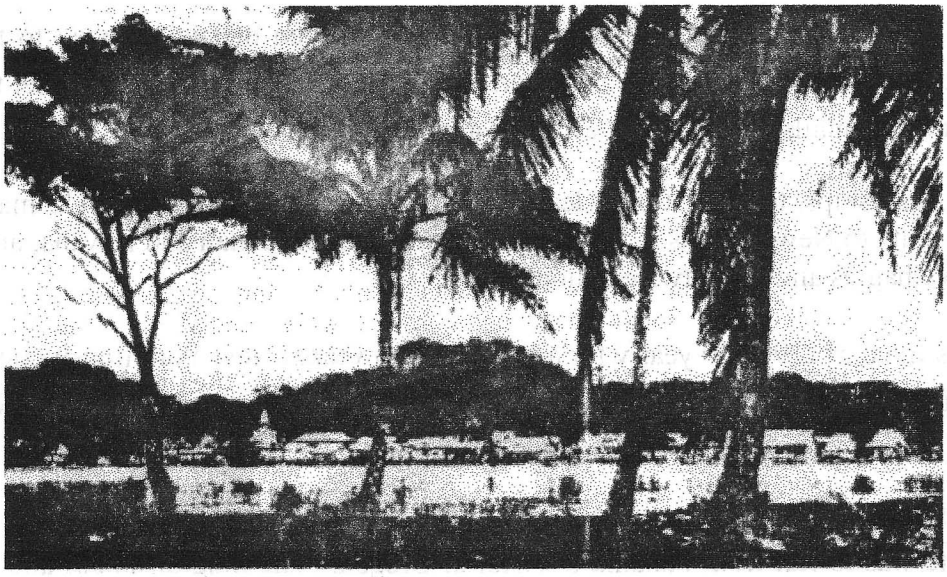
> "Many letters from and for citizens of the US pass the Isthmus yearly but unless the person to whom the letters are addressed happens to have a correspondent in the place to pay the transit postage of 18¾c per single letter, the letters remain in the post office here (Panama) and if not taken out at the end of the year they are then burned. As a great many letters for officers of the Pacific Squadron pass this way, I would respectfully suggest that the Honorable Secretary authorize me to pay the postage on such letters and forward them to their owners".

This apparently did the trick as the Navy later authorized a payment of $66.81 for the postage due on three bags of mail which entered the Nueva Granadian mail system at Chagres for forwarding to Panama City. This was later expanded to authority to pick up other letters addressed to the US at the postal facility in Panama and to see to their forwarding to Chagres for carriage into the US, where hopefully they would be collected. Mails coming from Chagres were handled by the local Collector of Customs or Postmaster who sent them to Panama City at government expense. This service also created an 18¾c charge (at the time 18¾c was equal to 1½ reales in local currency).

Remember too that this was in the early 1840s - before the War with Mexico, before the Gold Rush, and before the mail steamers began to make their regular journeys to and from Panama. Recognising an obvious need and being desirous of providing service to American citizens abroad, the State Department also appointed Nelson as Despatch Agent on 28 November 1843. In an 1843 letter to his superiors in Washington, D.C., the Consul noted that "about 400 letters pass across monthly". Provision was also made for a consulate at Chagres with equal responsibilities at that place. The two were charged with "attending [to] the conveyancing and forwarding, by land, and of the receipt and delivery of mails, letters, and despatches, at and between Chagres and Panama". For these services each Mail Agent/Consul was to be paid the sum of $500 per annum. This payment was to include any commissions or other service fees required. This seemed to work quite well at Panama, but the luckless Mr Bladen Forrest at Chagres landed there on 10 January 1844 - looked around and decided to leave on the very next boat, after a horrible two and a half months in that foul place.

Minor glitches in rendering payments for the forwarding duties continued, however, but the Postal Act of 1845 codified the authority and duty of US consuls to: -

> "pay the foreign postage of such letters destined for the US, as may be detained at the ports of foreign countries for the non-payment of postage; which postage shall be by the consul marked as paid by him, and the amount thereof shall be collected in the US ... on the delivery of the letters and repaid to the said consul, or credited on his account at the State Department".



The town of Chagres at the turn of the 19th Century.
Believe it or not, it was infinitely worse in 1844 when Mr Forrest was stationed there.

Things still depended on the devotion to duty or other interests of the consul, and at Panama things were still not always satisfactory. As late as July 1849 a visiting postal officer reported to the Postmaster General that: -

> "I can find no person here, not even the American consul, disposed to take any interest in the affairs of the US at this place ... I also find at the Customs House here, a New Granada Post Office, a very large quantity of letters for California, probably over 1000, no person to arrange for, and forwarding them".

How did the great change come about? A combination of good fortue, the willingness to assume risk for great gain, hard work, and what must have been a clear glimpse into the future - or perhaps plain old divine inspiration - by the railroad men. The good fortune had its genesis in December 1846, when the American diplomat Benjamin Bidlack negotiated a treaty with the authorities in Bogota guaranteeing for the US the exclusive right to establish the means of transit across the Panamanian Isthmus "upon any modes of communication that now exist, or that may be, hereafter, constructed". The Isthmus, which at the time was an integral part of Colombia, or Nueva Granada as it was then called, would have its "perfect neutrality" guaranteed by the US as well as its continued sovereignty under Colombia. This of course set the stage for a US controlled railroad, which was not long in coming.

About this time California was conquered from Mexico and incorporated into the burgeoning American Union. But there were still precious few Americans on the West Coast - for now!

A big problem was how to service these isolated West Coast communities and to cement them into the Union. A January 1859 story in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* gives us the full contemporary flavour of the background for our story of the mails across the Isthmus: -

> "But while the accession of these territories was of the highest importance to us from a national point of view, their distance rendered them almost inaccessible ... as well as inconvenient to the proper administration of law and government".

And so, on 20 April 1847, - before the California lands had been officially ceded to the US - the Secretary of the Navy, who at the time was responsible for the packet lines and who let the contracts for the transport of the mails aboard ships, awarded a mail contract for: -

> "a line of steamships, to consist of at least five vessels, for the transport of US mail from New York City to New Orleans ... touching at Charleston, Savannah and Havana, and from Havana to Chagres and back, twice a month".

The subsidy was fixed at £290,000 yearly for a period of ten years. New York transit company owner and successful railroad builder George Law assumed the contract together with a group of associates in August 1848 from the speculator who initially held it.

On 4 May of the same year an advertisement for bids on a monthly Pacific Coast mail service was made. The route was to run from Panama to Astoria, Oregon. The long distances and low level of economic activity created little interest in this route. However, a large subsidy was accepted by a speculator who sold it immediately to William H Aspinwall, a New York financier, who thereupon established the Pacific Mail Steamship Company.

From the standpoint of risk the Atlantic contract seemed safe enough as it connected several important trading cities; however, as the 1859 *Harper's* put it: -

> "The Pacific contract was looked upon by the generality of business men as a certain sequestration for a large amount of property for an indefinite time, with a faint prospect of profit; and the wonder seemd to be that so sound a man as Mr Aspinwall should have been engaged in it".

Joseph L Schott in his book *Rails Across Panama* goes on to describe the rest of the plot in a most graphic manner; -

> "But the sound Mr Aspinwall had more in mind than merely to found a steamship company serving the Pacific Coast. His basic aim was to construct and control a canal or railroad across the Isthmus of Panama. If he could control such an interoceanic passage ... he would accomplish what kings had not, and become one of the most pwerful shipping tycoons in the world. His problem was the Isthmus itself, the terible Isthmus of Panama."

LETTER TO THE EDITOR from DAVID ANGEVINE of Winchester, VA

"The two Nicaraguan obligatory tax stamps, illustrated in your last issue, are in fact listed by Scott as RA 63 & 64" [Many thanks - I'll try and get Gibbons to listed them. Anyone got any spares? - Ed]

LATIN AMERICAN PERFINS WANTED

If you have any perfins of Latin America which you do not want, please send them with the price requested to John Fosbery RDP FRPSL, 63 Sandringham Road, Newton Abbot, Devon TQ12 4HB, England. Telephone 01626 334507.